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ADDRESS,

Mr. B. H. Brewster

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

Alumni of the High School,

PHILADELPHIA.

BY

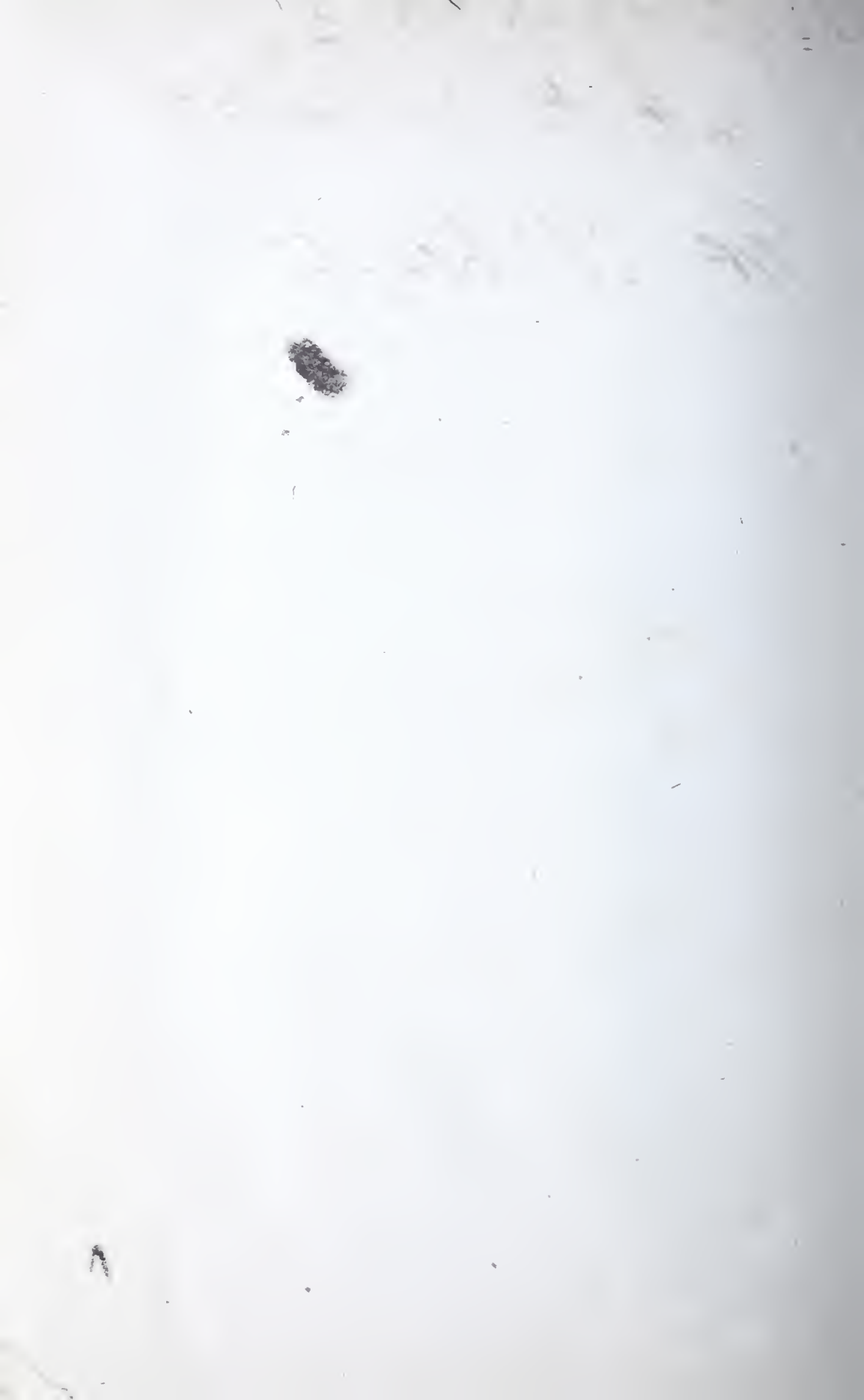
BENJAMIN H. BREWSTER,

February 12th, 1863.

PHILADELPHIA:

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A D D R E S S .

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—A short while since I was requested to open these exercises with a few remarks. Tasks like these are not always convenient to undertake, or easily performed. The daily duties of life fill the mind. The excitements, and labors, and distractions of a profession seldom give opportunity for that repose of thought which must invite the way to those reflections that will be proper to utter here. And yet all educated men should freely meet such calls with a prompt acceptance. It is an obligation of their caste to thus acknowledge their duty, and render their service in the cause of academical learning.

A few months ago my health compelled me to travel. I had been worn out with hard labor and much mental distress, and I sank under it, and so I went abroad to regain my strength of body and freshness of mind in the distraction of new scenes, and relief from business. While I was away in Germany, on the Rhine, I received a letter, one of many such that it has been my happy fortune to have been honored with, inviting me to address a distinguished literary body of a famous University. As I now mention it, I can distinctly recall the feelings of gratification and of regret that passed through my mind. There I sat looking out of the study window of a little villa, belonging to a kinswoman, perched on one of the hills that crown the valley of old father Rhine. On the left hand, in the distance, looming up like a mountain, was the mighty dome, the Cathedral of Cologne, a miracle of architectural grandeur, the real history of whose conception is clouded in the obscurity of centuries, and the city itself once styled the

Rome of Northern Europe; while on the right hand were the seven hills, and with them "the eastled crag of Drachenfels," and Bonn, the seat of learning, and the five towers of her Minister, built by HELENA, the mother of the great CONSTANTINE. All these lay before me, and as I gazed out on them in reverie I was stirred with a keen sense of pleasure at thus being recollected when I was far away, and with a still keener sense of regret that I could not answer the call, and obey the command of my lettered brethren. On my return home I was greeted with kind voices and gentle smiles of congratulating friends, and by none more kindly than by those who bore to me the request that brings me here to-night.

In what way shall I occupy the time allotted to me? What shall be the subject of my discourse? My main duty is to introduce, and with fair words ask you to welcome—warmly welcome—an alumnus of this school, who now comes offering the fruit of his early training within your walls, matured and ripened "in the still air and quiet of delightful studies."

Those who receive the honors of this school to-night have enjoyed a benefit, the fruit of a wise public policy that would sustain the State by instructing its people, and not by commanding them. Other Governments assume that men must be restrained by fear, but we have established ourselves on broader foundations. We enlighten the mind and purify the hearts of children by early and judicious teaching, and fit them for the duties and obligations of life. We lift men from the low level of subjection to the higher table-land of citizenship. A country to be governed as we are, by popular will, must be inhabited by educated men, or it will soon drift away into anarchy, and become the prey of factions, and then pass into the hands of some established aristocracy, oligarchy or despotism. By educated men I do not

mean only those who have been taught in the schools: for men may have the knowledge of books, and not know their fellows and their wants. Men may inform their minds, and widen the circle of their thoughts, and yet do all that at the cost of their moral natures. They may be wonders of wisdom and learning, and at the same time monsters in their affections and human sympathies. They may fathom the depths of science, and yet may be outstripped by a little child in the knowledge of that which passeth comprehension, and which maketh perfect wisdom—the knowledge of Him in whom we live, and move, and have our being. It is because we have been unmindful of this element of piety, the strongest as it is the purest instinct of our nature, that I sometimes fear we have fallen into the grief that now afflicts us as a people. We have been intent in our public schools only on mental culture, and in our business training and pursuits in stimulating industrious habits and bold, energetic ways of action. We have behaved as if the sum of life was to be made up by aiming at and achieving success, in acquiring wealth and intellectual freedom by banishing ignorance, forgetting all the while that there is a purity of nature to be had only as the product of good deeds, of generous thoughts and an abiding faith in Him whose service is perfect freedom. We talk of our rights and liberties as citizens, but we never think that with the office of citizenship there come solemn duties, and that the rights which we boast of as being ours are but a sacred trust for the faithful discharge of which we shall be held to a strict account here and hereafter. The proper knowledge of our religious and public duties both require that we shall have some suitable preparation of heart as well as of mind; purification of nature as well as gathering of knowledge. And the lad who, leaving

this or any other school of learning, is bent only on using what he has acquired for his own personal gain or promotion, will find before he has gone far in the journey of life that he has left behind him some of those equipments that are necessary for success. The most precious elements of his nature he has neglected, and when he should touch the prize he will find, alas! that he is too feeble to grasp it. Men as selfish and as designing as himself will jostle him, and in their rivalry delight to expose his shortcomings, and point out the infirmities of a character that has been weakened by a want of moral dignity and a neglect to cultivate the nobler, purer virtues of our nature.

Wherever ignorance and want of education prevail, there you will find a superstitious, rebellious arrogant race of men. Wherever education and want of religious training prevail, you will there find a race of men wise in their own conceit, exacting in their demands, and intolerant of the opinions of others. From such material you cannot make good citizens or build up a prosperous State,

“For righteousness, it is alone that can
Exalt a nation, or promote a man.”

How, then, can we wonder at what is now passing before us? When we have been so intent upon our rights of property, so earnest upon our liberty of person, one part of us so vain of our general education, and another part of us scorning that as a needless duty of the State, and standing proudly upon serfdom as if that ennobled those who owned them and made all others meaner men.

How little attraction has our public life for the better sort of men? How few of our officials are chosen because they are fit for their duties, yes, duties, that is the

word, of the place that is to be filled! Suffrage has become too cheap, and we are so apathetic to its value, that men must be roused to do their duty at the polls by drum and trumpet and flaunting banner and marching hosts and wild declamation. The educated, moral and responsible neglect it, while it is abused by the ignorant, vicious and thriftless. Each canvass is called a campaign, and each election a victory. Theoretically this is a democratic republic practically it has been an oligarchy of place-hunters. In the cities the tavern-keepers make the delegates, the delegates make the candidates for the city, State and nation; the delegates from the cities govern the large States, the large States the conventions of the Union, and the party from such beginnings elect the officer. When we thus trace this foul stream to its still fouler source, can we wonder at the result, or can we wonder that better men stand aside and refuse to enter into competition with such rivals, or to court the favor of such patrons!

“He that finds one drop of Heaven’s sweet mercy in his cup,
Can dig, beg, rot and perish, well content,
So he may wrap himself in honest rags
At his last gasp; but could not for a world
Fish up his dirty and dependent bread
From pools and ditches of the Commonwealth,
Sordid and sickening at his own success.”

Could all this be so if education had done her proper work, and “sweet religion” been more than “a rhapsody of words?” Would not mental freedom, real mental freedom, freedom from intolerance and pride of opinion, freedom from sectional vain-glory, freedom from scorn of learning, and the fruits of honest labor and humility in the sight of Heaven, have been followed by other works than those which now engage us, and make us a scandal and reproach to ourselves? I say nothing of

what others think of us. I say to ourselves, for our own high standard of public duty is the only one by which we can be tested, and at whose dread tribunal we can be condemned.

The people of other countries may think and grieve at our calamities as they defer their own deliverance but they dare not speak. We have never heard their views. Those who do speak for them are their masters, and in their hearts they hate us and gladly smile upon treason to encourage a resistance that shall weaken both, and make good their prophecies. And so I say I care not what they think. But I do care for what we think, and how we think, and why we think. Here, in such forums as this, are we to look for the correction of those errors for which we are now punished; here, where the young are trained, and where their parents and friends gather in to greet them as they come forth adorned with the honors of their schools, because they have done their duty and are now about to be advanced to still higher duties; here, if we would save the State, are to be excited nobler thoughts than love of power, thirst for gain, or pride of opinion.

